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SUBJECT: AGAINST ALL ODDS: GPC, JMP AGREE THAT YEMENI WOMEN NEED AN ELECTORAL QUOTA

REF: SANAA 1558

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. In an August 19 event on women's political participation in Yemen hosted by the Embassy, members of the ruling General People's Congress (GPC) and the opposition Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) came to a rare consensus that a women's quota as part of a proportional list electoral system was the best hope for near-term improvement regarding women's involvement in the political sphere. Attendees decried the social, educational and religious barriers that keep Yemeni women from full participation, and both ruling and opposition leaders pledged to include the "women's issue" in deliberations for the 2011 parliamentary elections. It is important that both parties work together to implement this rare consensus decision if and when the GPC-JMP dialogue resumes. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Men and women leaders of the ruling General People's Congress (GPC) and opposition Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), journalists and members of civil society turned out for an August 19 event entitled "The Yemeni Woman and the 2011 Elections," organized by the Embassy. In her opening remarks, the DCM highlighted the important role that women play in the development of democratic societies, and the need for Yemeni women to participate more fully in the democratic process. In a 90-minute discussion moderated by the National Democratic Institute, a majority of the usually fractured political community agreed that a system of proportional representation) to include a women's quota) was the best near-term method for advancing the role of women in Yemeni politics. "Past elections have failed everyone, not just the women. The current electoral system prevents a large part of society from participating in the political process," said Nasserite Party Secretary General Sultan al-Atwany.

¶3. (SBU) Although most attendees agreed that the women's issue needed to be addressed through electoral reform, details differed between and within parties. Khadija al-Khateri, a GPC leader in Sana'a, insisted that without a specific women's quota, the proportional list would fail Yemeni women. Former head of the Yemeni Journalists' Syndicate Abdulbari Taher said that a proportional list should include quotas for many groups) from the tribes to women and other marginalized peoples. Women leaders of Islah said that the proportional list would improve representation across the board, by first allowing Islah's male leadership to be elected to office, followed by the party's women members. According to JMP spokesman and Baath Party leader Naif al-Qanas, a 15 percent quota for women should be the minimum allotment. Islah Assistant Secretary General and MP Mohammed al-Sadi, however, disagreed that a women's quota is the solution. "A quota is like charity. Yemen women should struggle to get their rights," he said. Sadi, however, later agreed to set a schedule for women's participation in the GPC-JMP dialogue. (Note: The two parties are currently in a political stalemate with no formal dialogue taking place, but observers hope it will resume after the Ramadan holiday. End

Note.) The JMP has a women's committee as part of its National Dialogue (reftel), which will push for the inclusion of the women's issue in any electoral reforms.

¶4. (SBU) Members of the ruling party and opposition agreed that the socio-political environment) including family, the tribes, income and education) was stacked against Yemeni women, and even major strides in electoral reform would not necessitate political gains for the female population. Taher added that the Friday sermons in Salafi mosques and the country's hyper-conservative religious culture were a major part of the problem. Yemeni Socialist Party Women's Sector Head Wahbia Sabra worried that if the parties only focused on the political problem while ignoring the educational and cultural challenges, Yemeni women would still struggle for full participation in the democratic process. "It's not possible to solve all of the problems of women with a simple change to the Constitution," she said.

COMMENT

¶5. (SBU) Women political leaders must use the current hiatus in dialogue between the GPC and JMP to press their parties' leadership for policies regarding women. With both sides in general agreement on the need for a proportional list system, to include a women's quota, the time is ripe for pushing forward a much-needed electoral amendment on women's political participation. Women, and sympathetic party leaders, need to be ready to hit the ground running when dialogue (hopefully) resumes post-Ramadan. END COMMENT.
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